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The Man From Brodney's

By George Barr McCutcheon

(Chapter XXII Continued)

"I hope so," he said. "But I'm not so sure of it if you continue to love him as you do now."

She went out with her cheeks burning and a frightened stir in her heart. Her thoughts raced back to Neenah's fiery prophecy.

How could she face the charge, "I'm not so sure of it," unless she killed the indictment, "If you love him as you do now."

Lady Agnes and Browne passed by without seeing her and entered the window. She heard him say something to his companion, softly, tenderly—she knew not what it was. And Lady Agnes laughed—yes, nervously. Ah, but Agnes was playing! She was not in love with this man. It was different. It was not what Neenah meant—nor Deppingham, honest friend that he was.

Down below she heard voices. She wondered—inconsistently alert—whether he was one of the speakers. Thomas Saunders and Miss Pelham were coming in from the terrace. They were in love with each other! They could be in love with each other. There was no law, no convention that said them nay! They could marry—and still love! "If you continue to love him as you do now" battered at the doors of her conscience.

Her maid came in, and she prepared for bed. Left alone, she perched herself in the window seat to cool her heated face with the breezes that swept on ahead of the storm which was coming up from the sea. Her heart was hot; no breeze could cool it; nothing but the ice of decision could drive out the fever that possessed it.

"It is impossible—incredible!" she was saying to herself. "I could not love him like that. I should hate him—loved above me, am I not different from those women whom I have known and pitied and despised? Am I not different from Guelma von Herlik? Am I not different from Prince Henri's wife? Ah, and they loved too! And is he not different from those other men—those weak, unmanly men who came into the lives of those women? Ah, yes, yes! He is different."

She sat and stared out over the black sea, lighted fitfully by the distant lighthouse. There she pronounced sentence upon him—and herself. There was no place for him in her world. He should feel her disdain; he should suffer for his presumption. Presumption? In what way had he offended? She put her hands to her eyes, but her lips smiled—smiled with the memory of the kiss she had returned.

"What a fool! What a fool I am," she cried aloud, springing up resolutely. "I must forget. I told him I couldn't, but I can—I can." Halfway across the room she stopped, her hands clinched fiercely. "If if Kari were only such as he!" she moaned.

She went to her dressing table and resolutely unlocked one of the drawers, as one would open a case in which the most precious of treasures was kept.

"It was so silly of me!" she muttered. "I shall not keep them for him." The drawer was partly filled with cigarettes. She took one from among the rest and placed its tip in her red lips, a reckless light in her eyes. A match was struck, and then her hand seemed to be in the clutch of some invisible force. The light flickered and died in her fingers. A blush suffused her face, her eyes, her neck. Then, with a guilty, shamed, tender smile, she dropped the cigarette into the drawer. She turned the key.

"No," she said to herself; "I told him that I was keeping them for him."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRIAL OF VON BLITZ.

THE next morning found the weather unsettled. There had been a fierce storm during the night, and a nasty mist was blowing up from the sea. Deppingham kept to his room, although his cold was dissipated.

Chase had been up nearly all of the night, fearful lest the islanders should seize the opportunity to scale the walls under cover of the tempest. All through the night he had been possessed of a spirit of wild bravado, a glorious exaltation. He was keeping watch over her, standing between her and peril, guarding her while she slept. His thoughts, however, did not contemplate the princess fair in a state of wretched insomnia, with himself as the disturbing element.

He looked for her at breakfast time. They usually had their rolls and coffee together. When she did not appear he made more than one pretext to lengthen his own stay in the breakfast room. "She's trying to forget yesterday," he reflected.

Selim came to him in the midst of his reflections, bearing a thick, rain soaked envelope.

"It was found, excellency, inside the southern gate, and it is meant for you," said Selim. Chase gingerly slashed open the envelope with his fruit knife. He laughed ruefully as he read the simple but laborious message from Jacob von Blitz:

"Where are your warships all this time? They are not coming to you ever. Goodby. You got to die yet too. Your friend, Jacob von Blitz.

"Have stunned the blurred, sticky letter into his pocket and arose to stretch himself.

"There's something coming to you, Jacob," he said, much to the wonder of Selim. "Selim, unless I miss my guess pretty badly, we'll be having a message, not from Garcia, but from Rasula before long. How are my cigarettes holding out?"

"They run low, sahib. Neenah has given all of hers to me for you, excellency, and I have demanded those of the wives of Von Blitz."

"Selim, you must not forget that you are a gentleman. That was most ungallant. But I suppose you got them?"

"No, sahib. They refused to give them up. They are saving them for Mr. Britt," said Selim dejectedly.

"Ah, the ficklety of women!" he sighed. "There's a new word for you, Selim—ficklety."

It was far past midday when he heard from Rasula. He had seen the princess but once, and then she was walking briskly, wrapped in a rain coat, followed by her shivering dogs and her two Rapp-Thorberg soldiers. Somehow she failed to see Chase as he sauntered hungrily, almost imploringly, across the upper terrace, in plain view. Perhaps, after all, it was not the weather.

Rasula's messenger came to the gates and announced that he had a letter for Mr. Chase. Rasula had this to say:

We have reason to suspect that you were right in your suspicions. The golden plate has been found this day in the cave below the chateau, just as you have said. This much of what you have charged against Jacob von Blitz seems to be borne out by the evidence secured. Last night there was an attempt to rob the vaults in the company's bank. Again I followed your advice and laid a trap for the men engaged. They were slain in the struggle which followed. I have to inform you, sir, that your charge against Jacob von Blitz does not hold good in the case of the bank robbery. Therefore I am impelled to believe that you may have unjustly accused him of being implicated in the robbery of the treasure chests. He was not among the bank thieves. There were but three of them—the Boer foremen. Jacob von Blitz came up himself and joined us in the fight against the traitors. He was merciless in his anger against them. You have said that you will testify against him. Sir, I have taken it upon myself to place him under restraint notwithstanding his actions against the Boers. He shall have a fair trial. If it is proved that he is guilty, he shall pay the penalty. We are just people.

Sir, we, the people of Japat, will take you at your word. We ask you to appear against the prisoner and give evidence in support of your charge. He shall be placed on trial tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock. On my honor as a man and a believer I assure safety to you while you are among us on that occasion. I, Rasula, will meet you at the gates and will conduct you back to them in safety. If you are a true man, you will not evade the call. RASULA.

"Well, it looks as though Von Blitz has spiked your guns," said Deppingham. "The dog turns against his confederates and saves his own skin by killing them."

"In any event," said Browne, "you spoiled his little game. He loses the treasure, and he didn't get into the vaults. Rasula should take those points into consideration."

"He won't forget them, rest assured. That's why I'm sure that he'll take my word at the trial as against that of Von Blitz," said Chase.

"You—you don't mean to say, Mr. Chase, that you are going into the town?" cried Lady Agnes, wide eyed.

"Certainly, Lady Deppingham. They are expecting me."

"Don't be foolhardy, Chase. They will kill you like a rat!" exclaimed Deppingham.

"Oh, no, they won't," said the other confidently. "They've given their promise through Rasula. Whatever else they may be, they hold a promise sacred. They know I'll come. If I don't they'll know that I am a coward. You wouldn't have them think I am a coward, would you, Lady Deppingham?"

The next morning he coolly set forth for the gates, scarcely thinking enough of the adventure to warrant the matter of fact goodbys that he bestowed upon those who were congregated to see him off. His heart was sore as he strode rapidly down the drive. Genevra had not come down to say farewell.

"By heaven," he muttered, strangely vexed with her, "I fancy she means it. She's bent on showing me my place. But she might have come down and wished me good luck. That was little enough for her to do. Ah, well!" he sighed, putting it away from him.

As he turned into the tree lined avenue near the gate a slender young woman in a green and white gown arose from a seat in the shade and stepped a pace forward, opening her parasol quite leisurely as he quickened his steps. Her eyes gleamed brightly, and she was breathing as one who has run swiftly.

"You are determined to go down here among those men?" she demanded, the smile suddenly giving way to a look of disapproval. She ignored his hand.

"Certainly," he said after the moment of bewilderment. "Why not? I—I thought you had made up your mind to let me go without a—a word for good luck." She found great difficulty in meeting the wistful look in his eyes. "You are good to come down here to say goodby. We're almost strangers again."

"I did not come down to say goodby," she said, her lips trembling ever so slightly.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I am going with you into the town—as a witness," she said, and her face went pale at the thought of it.

"Genevra," he cried, "you—you would do that?"

"Why not, Mr. Chase?" She tried to speak calmly, but she was trembling. After all, she was a slender, helpless girl—not an amazon! "I saw and heard everything. They won't believe you unsupported. They won't harm me. If I swear to them that what you say is true they"—

Her hand was on his arm now, trembling, eager, yet charged with fear at the prospect ahead of her. He clasped the little hand in his and quickly lifted it to his lips.

"I'm happy again!" he cried. "It's all right with me now." She withdrew her hand on the instant.

"No, no! It isn't that," she said, her eyes narrowing. "Don't misinterpret my coming here to say that I will go. It isn't because—no, it isn't that!"

"I was unhappy because you had forsaken me," he said gently. "You are brave—you are wonderful! But I can't take you down there. I know what will happen if they find him guilty. Goodby, dear one. I'll come back—surely I'll come back. Thank you for sending me away happy."

"Won't you let me go with you?" she asked after a long, penetrating look into his eyes.

"I would not take you among them for all the world. You forget. Neither of us would come back."

"Neither of us?" she said slowly.

"I wouldn't come back without you," he said quietly, earnestly. She understood. "Goodby! Don't worry about me. I am in no danger."

"Goodby," she said, the princess now gone. "I shall pray for you with all my soul." She gave him her hand. It was cold and lifeless. He pressed it warmly and went quickly away, leaving her standing there in the still shade of the satinwoods, looking after him with eyes that grew wider and wider with the tears that welled up from behind.

Hours went by—slow, tortuous hours in which the souls of those who watched and waited for his return were tried to the utmost.

Once there came to the ears of the watchers on the mountain side the sound of distant shouts; later the brief rattle of firearms. The blood of everyone turned cold with apprehension; every face was stilled, every eye wild with dread. Neenah screamed as she fled across the terrace toward the drawbridge, where Selim stood as motionless as a statue.

Luncheon time passed, and again, as if drawn by a magnet, the entire household made its way to the front of the chateau.

At last Selim uttered a shout of joy. He forgot the deference due his betters and unceremoniously dashed off toward the gates, followed by Neenah, who seemed possessed of wings.

Chase was returning!

They saw him coming up the drive, his hat in his hand, his white umbrella held above his head. The eager, joyous watchers saw him greet Selim and his fluttering wife. They saw Selim fall upon his knees, and they felt the tears rushing to their own eyes.

"Hurrah!" shouted little Mr. Saunders in his excitement. Bowles and the three clerks joined him in the exhibition. The princess was conscious of the fact that at least five or six pairs of eyes were watching her face. She closed her lips and compelled her eyelids to show the dictates of a reverentful heart. She lowered them until they gave one the impression of indolent curiosity, even indifference. All the while her incomprehensible heart was thumping with a rapture that knew no allegiance to royal conventions.

A few minutes later he was among them, listening, with his cool, half satirical smile, to their protestations of joy and relief.

"Nonsense," he said in his most deprecating voice, taking a seat beside the princess on the railing and fanning himself lazily with his hat, to the mortification of his body servant, who waved a huge palm leaf in vigorous adulation. "It was nothing. Just being a witness, that's all. You'll find how easy it is when you get back to London and have to testify in the Skaggs will contest. Tell the truth, that's all." The princess was now looking at his brown face with eyes over which she had lost control. "Oh, by the bye," he said, as if struck by a sudden thought, "it is my painful duty to announce to the Mesdames von Blitz that they are widows."

There was a dead silence. The three women stared up at him, uncomprehending.

"Yes," he went on solemnly, "Jacob is no more. He was found guilty by his judges and executed with commendable haste and precision. He took his medicine bravely—twelve leaden pills administered by as many skillful surgeons. But it is yet too early to congratulate yourselves on your freedom. Rasula has promised to kill all of us, whether we deserve it or not."

"They shot him?" demanded Deppingham when he had finished.

"Admirably. By Jove, those fellows can shoot! They accepted my word against his—which is most gratifying to my pride. One other man testified against him—a chap who saw him with the Boers not ten minutes before the attempt was made to rob the vaults. Rasula appeared as counsel for the defense. Merely a matter of form. He knew that he was guilty. There was no talk of a new trial; no appeal to the supreme court, Britt; no expense to the community."

He was as unconcerned about it as

The princess was followed by her two Rapp-Thorberg soldiers.

if discussing the most trivial happening of the day. Von Blitz lived not ten minutes after sentence was passed.

"As to their intentions toward us," said Chase, "they are firm in their determination that no one shall leave the chateau alive. Rasula was quite frank with me. He is a cool devil. He calmly notified me that we will all be dead inside of two weeks. No ships will put in here so long as the plague exists. I asked him how we were to die, and he smiled as though he was holding something back as a surprise for us. He came as near to laughing as I've ever seen him when I asked him if he'd forgotten my warships. 'Why don't you have them here?' he asked. 'We're not ready,' said I. 'The six months are not up for nine days yet.' I also made the interesting discovery that suits have already been brought in England to break the will on the grounds of insanity."

"But what good will that do us if we are to die here?" exclaimed Bobby Browne.

"None whatsoever," said Chase calmly. "You must admit, however, that you exhibited signs of hereditary insanity by coming here in the first place. I'm beginning to believe that there's a streak of it in my family too."

"And you—you saw him killed?" asked the princess in an awed voice, pale and full of horror.

"Yes. I could not avoid it."

"They killed him on your—on your?" she could not complete the sentence but shuddered expressively.

"Yes. He deserved death, princess. I am more or less like the Moslem in one respect. I might excuse a thief or a murderer, but I have no pity for a traitor."

"You saw him killed?" she said in the same awed voice, involuntarily drawing away from him.

"Yes," he said, "and you would have seen him killed, too, if you had gone down with me to appear against him."

She looked up quickly and then thanked him almost in a whisper.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CENTURIES TO FORGET.

"MY lord," said Saunders the next day, appearing before his lordship after an agitated hour of preparation, "it's come to a point where something's got to be done." He got that far and then turned quite purple. His collar seemed to be choking him. "If what Mr. Chase says is true, we've got a precious short time to live. Well, we've—we've concluded to get all we can out of the time that's left, my lord. So I've come to ask if it will be all right with you and her ladyship, sir. We don't want to do anything that would seem forward and out of place, sir."

"It's very considerate of you, Saunders, but what the devil are you talking about?"

"Miss—Miss Pelham and I have decided to get—er—get married before it is too late."

Deppingham stared hard for a moment and then grinned broadly.

"You mean before you die?"

"That's it exactly, my lord. Haw, haw! It would be a bit late, wouldn't it, if we waited till afterward. Haw, haw! Splendid! So I have come to ask if you think it will interfere with your arrangements if—if we should be married tonight?"

"I'm sure, Saunders, that it won't discommode me in the least," said his lordship genially. "By all means, Saunders, let it be tonight, for tomorrow we may die."

"Will you kindly speak to her ladyship, sir?"

"Gladly. And I'll take it as an honor if you will permit me to give away the bride."

"Thank you, my lord," cried Saunders, his face beaming. His lordship shook hands with him, whereupon his cup of happiness overflowed, notwithstanding the fact that his honeymoon was likely to be of scarcely any duration whatsoever.

The wedding took place that night in the little chapel. Chase deliberately took possession of the princess after the hollow wedding supper had come to an end. Her mood had changed. Now she was quite at ease with him. The taunting gleam in her eyes presaged evil moments for his peace of mind.

"I'm inspired," he said to her. "A wedding always inspires me."

"It's very strange that you've never married," she retorted. She was striding freely by his side, confident in her power to resist sentiment with mockery.

"Will you be my wife?" he asked abruptly. She caught her breath before laughing tolerantly and then looked into his eyes with a tantalizing ingenuousness.

"By no means," she responded. "I am not oppressed by the same illness that actuated Miss Pelham. You see, Mr. Chase, I am quite confident that we are not to die in two weeks."

"I could almost wish that we could die in that time," he said.

"How very diabolical!"

"It may seem odd to you, but I'd rather see you dead than married to Prince Karl." She was silent. He went on, "Would you consent to be my wife if you felt in your heart that we should never leave this island?"

"I think I shall go in, Mr. Chase," she said, with a warning shake of her head.

"Don't, please! I'm not asking you to marry me if we should leave the island. You must give me credit for that," he argued whimsically.

"Ah, I see," she said, apparently very much relieved. "You want me only with the understanding that death should be quite close at hand to relieve you. And if I were to become your wife, here and now, and we should be taken from this dreadful place—what then?"

"You probably would have to go through a long and miserable career as plain Goodwife Chase," he explained.

"If it will make you any happier," she said, with a smile in which there lurked a touch of mischievous triumph, "I can say that I might consent to marry you if I were not so positive that I will leave the island soon. You seem to forget that my uncle's yacht is to call here, even though your cruisers will not."

"I'll risk even that," he maintained stoutly.

She stopped suddenly, her hand upon his arm.

"Do you really love me?" she demanded earnestly.

"With all my soul, I swear to you," he replied, staggered by the abrupt change in her manner.

"Then don't make it any harder for me," she said. "You know that I could not do what you ask. Please, please be fair with me. I—I can't even jest about it. It is too much to ask of me," she went on, with a strange firmness in her voice. "It would require centuries to make me forget that I am a princess, just as centuries were taken up in creating me what I am. I am no better than you, dear, but—but—you understand?" She said it so pleadingly, so hopelessly, that he understood that it was that she could not say to him, "We seldom, if ever, marry the men whom God has made for us to love."

He lifted her hands to his breast and held them there. "If you will just go on loving me I'll some day make you forget you're a princess." She smiled and shook her head. Her hair gleamed red and bronze in the kindly light; a soft perfume came up to his nostrils.

* * * * * * *

The next day three of the native servants became violently ill, seized by the most appalling convulsions. At first a thrill of horror ran through the chateau. The plague—the plague in reality!

But these fears were quickly dissipated. The sufferers soon began to mend. By nightfall they were fairly well recovered. The mysterious seizure, however, was unexplained. Chase alone divined the cause. Poison! He was sure of it! But who the poisoner?

All previous perils and all that the future seemed to promise were forgotten in the startling discovery that came with the fall of night.

Lady Deppingham and Robert Browne were missing! They had disappeared as if swallowed by the earth itself! Neenah, the wife of Selim, was the last of those in the chateau to see the heirs. They crossed the swift torrent by the narrow bridge at the base of the cliff and stopped below the mouth of the cavern which blew its cool breath out upon the hanging garden. Later on she saw them climb the stanch ladder and stand in the black opening, apparently enjoying the cooling wind that came from the damp bowels of the mountain. Her attention was called elsewhere, and that was the last glimpse she had of the two people about whom centered the struggle for untold riches.

"Chase, they are lost in there!" groaned Deppingham, numb with apprehension. He was trembling like a leaf.

"There's just one thing to do," said Chase. "We've got to explore that cavern to the end. They may have lost their bearings and strayed off into one of the lateral passages."

"I—I can't bear the thought of her wandering about in that horrible place," Deppingham cried as he started resolutely toward the ladder.

"She'll come out of it all right," said Chase, a sudden compassion in his eyes.

Drusilla Browne was standing near by, cold and silent with dread, a set expression in her eyes. Her lips moved slowly, and Deppingham heard the bitter words: "You will find them, Lord Deppingham. You will find them!"

He stopped and passed his hand over his eyes. Then, without a word, he snatched a rifle from the hands of one of the patrol and led the way up the ladder. Chase turned to the white faced princess and said between his teeth:

(To be Continued)